

Public Relations Resource Assessment System



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Public Relations Resource Assessment System
for the South Carolina Vocational Rehabilitation Department
Mark G. Wade, Public Information Director

Project Overview:

The project's goal was the development of a system for assessing the effectiveness of agency public relations resources (printed, video, and web) in reaching their target audiences. Based on the findings, it could result in the discontinuation of several current resources, format changes for others, and development of new ones. The assessment system will become a standard procedure in periodic reviews of resources.

Problem Statement:

1. Over the past ten years the director of the Public Information office of the South Carolina Vocational Rehabilitation Department (SCVRD) has been responsible for the development and implementation of a variety of public relations resources designed to reach various target audiences and promote the achievement of the agency's mission of employment for South Carolinians with disabilities. This process has evolved gradually over that decade through a series of updates to existing public relations resources and the development and launching of a number of other new resources, most notably the agency web site. Many printed resources have received occasional cosmetic changes and informational "tweaking," but have remained largely unchanged for years in their approach under an assumption of effectiveness. Video resources are well-received and perceived as extremely professional, but are neither particularly varied in

approach nor in many cases up-to-date in content as the agency implements new emphases and services. The web site has grown in content and currency but is possibly underutilized as a tool for marketing to clients, businesses and referral sources.

2. The project is tied to the agency's mission in the sense that effective printed and electronic resources enhance understanding of the agency and its goals and should therefore generate interest in the agency's services at a number of levels. Ideally the success of these resources would contribute to the referral of people with disabilities who want to prepare for, achieve and maintain competitive employment; to the recruitment of employers to hire those individuals; and to successful marketing to business partners to provide outsource opportunities for the training of those individuals. Though the project will not likely derive the direct, quantitative impact of public relations tools on these outcomes, the degree to which target audiences find the tools useful in accomplishing the agency mission will be important, and that may be supported by the agency's achievement of its basic goals or the goals of the specific programs supported by the public relations tools.
3. There has been no systematic process to prioritize public relations tools, to measure their effectiveness, or to gauge whether they meet changing needs and audiences. This is not uncommon among PR organizations. "Too many times, public relations departments and firms spend their time conceiving of a solution when they don't know enough about the problem to know what the indicated

solution should be,” said Edward M. Block, retired senior vice president of AT&T.
(Broom and Dozier, p.9)

Historically, “not only does research play a minor part in public relations practice, it often is greeted with skepticism or hostility ... there is always the fallback position that public relations deals with ‘intangibles not amenable to research and measurement.’” (Broom and Dozier, pg. 10-11)

Forty-six percent of respondents to a *PR Week* survey in 2004 said they relied on “gut” feelings to assess effectiveness of their PR campaigns. (Apostilidou)

However, the growing demand for accountability within organizations has not exempted public relations personnel, and continued studies into PR measurement show an increased acceptance of the need for evaluation tools.

Published strategies and online resources for establishment of evaluation methods are convincing in that those who administer PR programs for their organizations “would be operating in the dark without any guidance or clear sense of direction.” (Lindenmann, pg.2)

Accordingly, the desired result of the project is the development of a system for assessing the effectiveness of public relations resources and for renovating the pool of resources made available. The assessment system could result in the discontinuation of several current resources, format changes for others, and development of new ones. The system could be used periodically in the future as a cyclical process with trend information.

Data collection:

4. The primary goal of the data collection is to attain an understanding of the usefulness of the PR resources in getting the agency's messages across to target audiences. "For the public relations or public affairs officer, a useful definition of *public relations research* is that it is an essential tool for fact and opinion gathering—a systematic effort aimed at discovering, confirming and/or understanding through objective appraisal the facts or opinions pertaining to a specified problem, situation or opportunity." (Lindenmann, p.1)

"You want to pretest your creative to see if in fact it communicates what you had intended it to communicate. Then you would launch the effort and set milestones, at which you would go back and test to see if your program is making a difference. You would also use these tests to fine-tune the program, to see where it needs to be 'tweaked.'" (Edward M. Block, in Broom and Dozier, pg. 9)

For this project the collection of initial data to determine what implementation plans to consider centered on both available external resources and the availability of existing data from previous surveys and reports conducted by SCVRD. The external resources chosen were based on searches for content most closely linked to this project's intent and viability of those sources by reputation or qualifications. These are in the form of books, Internet sites and trade journals.

Available existing data within our agency included two surveys for feedback on publications conducted in 2006 and 1998, a statistical report on visitors to the agency web site over a four-month period in 2006, and statistical reports on

inquiries the agency received directly through its web site “contact us” portal over several years. There was no data on video resource effectiveness other than circulation figures.

5. Critical terms used in the project include:

Circulation: number of copies distributed of a given edition of a publication or resource.

CORE: The Committee on Rehabilitation Excellence, a group of top level managers, which analyzes data, formulates and assesses plans for corrective action, and assures implementation and follow-up.

Focus Group: exploratory technique in which a group of target audience members or message carriers are encouraged to discuss freely their opinions and concerns about selected PR resources.

Message carriers: VR staff members or others who actually deliver the PR resources to target audiences.

Multivariate analysis: a study that examines three or more variables and their relationship.

Outcomes: long-term measure of effectiveness of a resource that gauges whether targeted audience groups changed their opinions, attitudes or behavior patterns as a result of the resource’s message.

Outputs: The development and distribution of public relations resources.

Outtakes: measure of whether target audiences received and paid attention to the key messages, understood them, and used them accordingly.

Qualitative research: studies that are somewhat subjective and use an open-ended, free response format.

Quantitative research: studies that are highly objective and use closed-end, forced choice responses.

Univariate analysis: a study that examines one variable at a time.

Data analysis:

6. For printed and video resources, the primary message carriers are agency staff members who distribute the printed and video resources to their target audiences. Existing data that had been captured through earlier surveys and reports were helpful in getting an overview of perceptions and, to some degree, usefulness of printed resources. Surveys that combined quantitative and qualitative data were used to gather this information in 1998 and 2006. It is telling that many of the same publications were included in both surveys, eight years apart, which illustrates the tendency to continue the use of resources on the assumption that they are effective. In fairness, some of the publications from the 1998 survey were since discontinued or given facelifts that reflected some of the suggestions from the survey responses. The 2006 survey was conducted electronically via email and like its forerunner included both closed-end questions and an opportunity to suggest improvements. At the time of compilation, results of both surveys were considered “food for thought” by the PR staff when considering changes in content or availability, but were neither shared with management nor systematically evaluated. Most publication revisions were

generated by a rote decision to consult related program managers to see if they wanted to change them, which typically occurred when supplies were running low and the PR staff did not want to reprint outdated information that needed revision.

Research clearly shows that the approach used in these surveys was short-sighted at best. When considering evaluation of public relations effectiveness, PR experts frequently refer to a quote by Harold D. Lasswell, even though he was a political scientist who lived 50 years ago. "He said, 'If you can figure out *who* says *what*, *to whom*, *how*, *with what effect*, you will have come a long way in understanding how communications work.' The *who* refers to the sources of information, the *what* to the messages that are being disseminated, the *to whom* to the targeted audiences, the *how* to the channels of communications; and the *with what effect* to the eventual outputs and outcomes of the communications effort."

(Lindenmann, p. 3)

7. It is arguable that **four** of those five factors were *not* adequately measured in the SCVRD surveys. For instance, to better address Lasswell's standards, the survey question for VR staff (who distribute the brochures) that asked "Is the message clear" should really have asked "What is the key message?" This would help the survey evaluator know whether the staff is using it for the intended message or simply trying to get something into the hands of the customer. Similarly, the *to whom* question should be asked to learn exactly what types of customers are receiving the information. The *how* question could reveal whether the materials are disseminated in person and with follow-up, or whether they are handed out

or mailed with no elaboration. The *with what effect* question, while perhaps a difficult one to answer for survey respondents, nevertheless is critical. The past survey asked "how effective is it?" which could be answered only by a choice among degrees of perceived effectiveness such as "somewhat effective," or "very effective." Better choices of questions such as "What specific effect have you seen from the use of this publication?" have been implemented into the new survey instrument, which prompts users to reveal whether, for example, a training center marketing tool was well received and seemed to be a factor in a company's decision to become an outsource partner with the agency.

Indeed, based on public relations research and review of existing data, the wrong questions were being asked and the ranges of measurement tools were far too limited. The agency's web site has been extremely well-received in terms of anecdotal feedback both internally and externally. The web site is easily accessible through all major search engines, is identified on all agency print resources, and is linked from many other sites including government and disability-specific organizations. It has evolved from a basic, largely unchanging summary of agency information into a site that is regularly updated with new stories, program updates, linked resources, virtual tours, and other fresh content. However, the only data for web site measurement had been a statistical sampling of use over a three month period in 2006, which is difficult to interpret, and records of all inquiries that came in from the general public through the "contact us" email feature on the site. These inquiries have increased over the years and have resulted in client referrals, the solution of client relations issues, new

business partnerships, and the opportunity to provide general information about the SCVRD program. But there is no direct evidence linking the “silent majority” of web site visitors to achievement of the agency’s goals.

Video resources (DVDs and CDs produced in-house by the PR staff) are similarly very well received and in seemingly high demand, but data on specifically how they are used and *to what effect* were not compiled. There are gaps in video resources as related to topical areas; several key agency initiatives have not been given video marketing support or have outdated videos falling into disuse.

Quantities of printed publications and videos put into circulation are tracked, including office locations requesting them, but no effectiveness measurements are in place. While quantitative data is important in measuring the actual *use* of the resources, Likert-style closed ended questions don’t get to root cause of dissatisfaction nor do they pinpoint the respondent’s actual understanding of the resource’s purpose. The implementation plan uses a variety of qualitative and quantitative measurement tools to better understand the impact of PR resources on the ultimate employment of people with disabilities and the involvement of employers and business partners. It includes more pinpointed, relevant and open-ended questions and qualitative data, as referenced above. Quantitative measurement will be boosted by the new automatic tracking system on the agency’s intranet; this system takes field requests for PR resources and captures improved data on resource circulation and use-by-location (*appendix 2, pg.16*).

Implementation Plan:

8. Action steps (and who performs them) needed to complete the goal include:

- **Panel discussion** of senior staff members involved in program development and case service delivery to verify validity and consistency of resources so that upcoming surveys will be appropriate. (Mark Wade, Public Info. Director) *Timeframe*: Completed December 2007. *Cost*: none
- **Focus groups** of varied VR staff to include discussion of all PR resources. Videoconferencing will be utilized to draw from a statewide sample without travel time and cost. The Human Resources Development Director (Belinda Langton) was enlisted to assist in organizing the focus groups and providing videoconferencing access. In order to avoid bias or “leading” questions in the focus group dialogue, a trained impartial moderator (Teri Norris) was assigned to conduct the focus groups. Based on the earlier panel discussion, it was determined to have three focus groups with slightly differing marketing perspectives—(1) counselors and employment coaches; (2) business development specialists and work training center managers; (3) area supervisors and comprehensive programs supervisors. Each focus group will be composed of six members, with the three area development directors choosing two members each based on their advanced knowledge of the abilities and marketing acumen of personnel throughout the state. *Timeframe*: February and March 2008. *Cost*: none (agency has videoconferencing network linking all area offices and the State Office at no cost)
- **Emailed surveys** of other users, including a wider sample of those positions represented in focus groups. (Mark Wade, Sharon Kelly and Steven Cromer from IT staff) *Timeframe*: Survey tool has been developed, incorporating pertinent questions in line with Lasswell’s key questions (see page 7). Surveys are tailored to target audience of staff and the survey tool enables distribution by job title in most cases (area supervisors, counselors, etc.) SurveyGold software graphs all results and separates data

by variables for use by CORE and others who assess the data (*appendix 1, page 16*). *Cost*: none added due to the agency's earlier acquisition of the SurveyGold subscription.

- More formal **collection of quantitative data**, such as volume and destination of all printed and video resource dissemination, which is collected now but not compiled in an organized manner (PR work study or intern will be responsible for compilation) *Timeframe*: beginning March 2008 after at least one month of results from new Public Information Request tracking system (*appendix 2, page 17*), which is being activated in early February 2008. *Cost*: minimal, considering this will be a small portion of the work study's overall duties. The tracking system was developed by the IT department at no cost to the Public Information office.
- **Refined tracking system for SCVRD web site** use, to include monthly count of separate visitors, how they are referred to site, and which sections of the site receive the heaviest traffic. (Mark Gamble, Media Resources Specialist) *Timeframe*: activated January 2008 (*appendix 3, page 18*). *Cost*: none due to use of free monitoring tool.
- Development of **univariate and/or multivariate analysis tool(s)** (Broom and Dozier, p.207-212) for the quarterly agency newsletter, *New Horizons*, in which a representative sample of the internal and external customers on the circulation list will answer specific questions related to aspects of the newsletter including interest level, types of stories preferred, and readability. (Mark Wade, Sharon Kelly, possibly IT staff) *Timeframe*: Spring 2008. *Cost*: none.
- Development of meaningful and workable **tool for assessment** of PR resources by the agency's **referral sources, business partners and other external customers**. (Mark Wade) *Timeframe*: 2008. *Cost*: unknown. The agency's Business Partnership Network could be utilized to provide feedback from the employer/business partner perspective.

The system will be integrated into standard operating procedure at a frequency designed to keep resources current with needs, yet not to so often as to overly burden staff and survey participants. To be inclusive as possible, the participants in focus groups would be changed from cycle to cycle when possible.

Evaluation Method:

9. Because of the very opinionated nature of PR tool effectiveness feedback (past surveys have revealed that many users can't get past what they perceive as design flaws in a publication to even assess the effectiveness of its content, while other respondents have been very positive about the same publication), results will need to be evaluated in a way that will help determine an "overall" effectiveness level, worth to the agency, and a weighted process for determining if change/elimination is needed. For this reason a force field analysis will be a viable method to identify driving forces and restraining forces, blending a variety of input and perspectives.

The Committee on Rehabilitation Excellence (CORE) plus any additional reviewers it might find appropriate to invite, will be presented with the findings by the Public Information Director, and will use the force field methodology to develop recommendations for improving, removing, replacing, or leaving unchanged the PR resources. The agency director will be apprised of their recommendations prior to implementation. The Public Information Director will work with CORE and the agency director to prioritize steps to implementation. In January 2008 the agency director appointed an editorial review board, which has

the responsibility of signing off on all new or significantly revised resources prior to circulation. This board is chaired by a CORE member and will be integrated into the review process

10. Tracking charts on all data from surveys and focus groups will be created and maintained throughout the life cycle of each resource. Once fully established, the system will be measured using the same data collection methods that went into the initial analysis. The process will repeat itself at regular intervals, with feedback compared from cycle to cycle. Improved quantitative data from the new PR resource tracking system will allow comparison of open-ended feedback with data on actual use of the resources.

Summary and Recommendations:

11. Key findings are (1) public relations effectiveness measurement has been the subject of general disagreement over the years due to its subjective nature, but the position that evaluation systems are needed has grown in acceptance; (2) SCVRD's public relations resources are generally well received, but mostly through anecdotal evidence, with limited hard data to support the resources' viability, relevance to current agency needs, and effectiveness in achieving outcomes aligned with the agency mission; (3) the project has resulted in development of survey instruments that incorporate more prompts for feedback that is specific in assessing the effectiveness of resources is needed, in a variety of formats to cover key target audiences and all resource types; (4) a blend of qualitative and quantitative data will be used to compile appropriate data for

assessing resource effectiveness and making recommendations; and (5) the system should be cyclical and part of standard operating procedure.

Future actions might include consideration of expanding the system to measure news media placement of the agency's messages, and further enhancement of methodology in addressing the challenges of measuring outtakes and outcomes that relate PR resources more closely to the agency's success in placing people with disabilities into employment and in the successful marketing of the agency to employers and business partners.

Works Cited:

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- Weiner, Mark. "Do Right By Your Research," *PR Week US*, April 24, 2006.
- Apostolidou, Afroditi. "PR Evaluation: Reality or Pipe Dream?", January 4, 2006, University of Westminster, <<http://afroditapostolidou.blogspot.com>>
- Broom, Glen M and David M. Dozier. *Using Research in Public Relations: Applications to Program Management*. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall.

Other Works Consulted and Utilized:

- "PProof: Porter Novelli Key Message Assessment & Optimization," Institute for Public Relations, 2006.
www.instituteforpr.org/files/uploads/Novelli_o6GoldenRuler.pdf
- Jeffery, Angie and Gary Getto. "Correlating Outputs to Outcomes," VMS. Distributed at IABC presentation, Columbia S.C., April 3, 2007.
- Sponhour, Michael. "The Essential Elements of Effective State Agency Communication," *Public Policy and Practice* e-newsletter, Institute for Public Service and Policy Research, University of South Carolina, November 2006.

Appendices

1. Example from 2008 **Resource Survey (e-mail)**. The line of questioning offers more direct information on target audience, use, and perceived effectiveness than did the agency's earlier surveys.

PR Resources Survey 08

Instructions

Answer questions as they relate to you. For most answers, check the boxes most applicable to you or fill in the blanks.

Breakthrough magazine

I give Breakthrough to:

(Select all that apply.)

- ☐ Referral sources for clients
- ☐ Employers, in hope that they will hire clients
- ☐ Potential contractors for training center
- ☐ Legislators or their staff members
- ☐ General public interested in VR
- ☐ I don't give it to anyone.

The target audience I use Breakthrough with THE MOST is:

- ☐ Referral sources for clients
- ☐ Employers, in hope that they will hire clients
- ☐ Potential contractors for training center
- ☐ Legislators or their staff members
- ☐ General public interested in VR
- ☐ I don't give it to anyone.

It is clear to me that Breakthrough is an effective marketing tool for VR.

- ☐ True.
- ☐ False
- ☐ I don't use Breakthrough.

If you answered True to the previous question (that it is clear Breakthrough is an effective tool), please share your evidence that this is true.

If you answered false to Question 3 (meaning that you do not feel Breakthrough is an effective marketing tool), please share your reason.

Continue

Created with SurveyGold survey software - www.surveygold.com

2. PR Resources Tracking System (quantitative and location data) development is complete and is being activated statewide February 2008. This not only enhances the agency's ability to more efficiently carry out and track requests for resources, but also provides a tool for assessing the level of use of resources by geographical region, staff person, and office.

AADT140 - Public Information Request Program

| | Requestor Location | Description of Request | Staff Responsible | Date Needed | Status | Target |
|-------|--------------------|------------------------------|-------------------|-------------|--------|--------|
| ADF | 0107 | Envelopes | Steven Clough | 07/31/2007 | | |
| KELLY | 0107 | Relaxation CDs | Mark Gamble | 11/22/2007 | | |
| ADE | 0107 | Develop brochure/publication | Sharon Kelly | 11/20/2007 | | |
| ADE | | Develop brochure/publication | Sharon Kelly | ASAP | | |
| TERIS | 0107 | Copies of videos | Mark Gamble | 11/22/2007 | | 11/2 |
| TERS | 0107 | Business Cards | Steven Clough | 11/24/2007 | | |
| ADE | 0107 | Order Brochures | Steven Clough | ASAP | | |
| ADE | 0107 | Order Brochures | Steven Clough | 12/03/2007 | | |
| ADF | 0107 | Copies of videos | Mark Gamble | 12/05/2007 | | |

AADT140 - Place/Edit Workorder

Request Number # 2007120304

Location Code: 0107 SPECIAL SERVICES

Description of Request: Brochures

Requester Name: Joe Smith

Date Needed: At Earliest Convenience

Status: ☐ Click Check box to set Target Date

Enter Request Description: Brochure Name: Breakthrough magazine
Quantity: 75

Enter Request Comments:

Attachments:

Buttons: Void Work Order, Add Attachment File, Cancel

Taskbar: start, Internet Explorer, Open Project Out..., AADT140 - SCV..., AADT140 - PUBL..., AADT140 - Plac..., 9:58 AM

3. Web Site Traffic Analysis is achieved through a newly implemented tool (Google Analytics software) that gives a breakdown on number of visitors to site as well as which pages on site get the most attention, how long is spent on the site, and which search engines and other link referral sources are used to reach the site. This can be tracked monthly or in any other time frames. The example below shows that more than 4,000 different people visited in January 2008.

